

First Time, First Storm

by Capt. Douglas Malat

Funny how we focus on the excitement. It's like tunnel vision when an adventure is about to begin. Sailing for the first time and on our own elevated us. We were just 16, had just finished our sailing lesson, and were allowed to sail off alone. We left the dock in picture perfect weather and headed out into the bay. Barry was always brimming with confidence, so you never minded going under his wing. He made you feel safe even in a new endeavor.

From above, the clouds darkened rapidly. The heat rising off the land fueled the developing squall. The clouds were falling over each other, like dough being kneaded. This small, isolated, and voracious weather front devoured the rising heat, pure energy, of this storm. Digesting it ever faster, it created a wind tunnel effect below. The clouds now started a rhythmic rolling-then-kneading, rolling-then-kneading march. It was the warmest part of the day, lunch for this storm!

From below, the clouds blanketed the sky. The kneading looked as if the clouds were on a free fall until they merged with another cloud. With each process, moment to moment, the clouds would get darker and darker. I don't remember when or why I looked up. I wasn't seasoned enough to feel this change going on. It could have been the steady rise of the wind or the dimming light as darkness enveloped the bay.

Barry and I were enjoying ourselves as the small Lightning sailboat surged forward. No engine, no noise, except for the rushing water going by the gunwales (pronounced gunnels by many). As the wind speed rose, the boat would accelerate. It got to a point

where the hull lifted out of the water and began to plane. We knew this feeling because Barry's boat would do the same thing when reaching a certain speed. We would just skim across the top of the water. Like the speedster, the Lightning had that same feeling. Its wooden hull had a beefy, sturdy feel for its size.



I remember the sailboat banging over a few wavelets and then heeling over wildly, almost sailing on its side. This could have been the moment Barry and I looked up. We went from an emotional flying high to

a flying low in an instant. I think everyone at one time or another has experienced this. Barry was at the tiller when he barked for the main sail to be let out. The heeling stopped, but our acceleration seemed to double with that move. I looked for a hand-hold, feeling a sense of danger at this speed. I turned to Barry to say something, but looking at his face, I knew I was within his peak moment, one that he'd created. His hair flew back and was flattened close to his head and his eyes squinted a bit from the wind, as if he were an eagle sighting, then diving for its prey. All concentration.

At 16, we sure weren't ready for this. The day actually turned to night because the thickness of the clouds choked off the light in the sky. Before, the clouds were at a distance, but now seemed to be overhead. "Let's tack!" Barry commanded! A good call, I thought to myself. It meant heading back. At the speed we were going, I thought we could outrun it. Wrong! We both squatted in the small cockpit for the upcoming tack. Barry's voice rose above the wind. "Ready to come about!"

I hurriedly untangled the lines from one another and yelled back, "Ready," hoping at this point that Barry heard me over the howling wind.

"Alright," Barry said, "Coming about!" With that, he pushed the tiller over and finessed his way across to the other side of the boat. The sails came amidships, flapping furiously. I let loose the one side and tightened in on the other, ducking as the wooden

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boom flailed wildly just above my head. The sails kept whacking away until the wind filled them. The end of the mainsail boom, buried itself in the water as the boat heeled over uncontrollably.

Barry yelled, "Grab the tiller!"

We switched places and I noticed Barry feverishly adjusting the sails. Again the boat sat up straight and took off as I held on for dear life! It stopped heeling for the moment and Barry turned back, showing a large grin. Yeah, he did it, I thought.

It was now dark in front of us and the Lightning started again heeling over more and more. I was having a private battle with the tiller and wondered for a second how Barry made it look so easy. Rain started pelting us with drops the size of water balloons. We were soaked in an instant. Barry and I knew we were out of our league. We were not trying to survive, we were not trying to do anything but sail, until "Sandbar! Sandbar! Head for it!" Barry hollered! I remember moving the tiller to point us there, but the boat heeled to a point where the water came into the cockpit! I moved the tiller back a bit and the boat sat somewhat upright. The shipped water was up to my ankles and sloshing around. Looking forward, over the whitecaps, the sandbar was definitely getting closer.

At home, Barry's parents had called the Coast Guard. Weather alerts were on the radio and the TV, cautioning the public, especially boaters. The quick change of weather seemed to have caught many boaters

in this fast-moving squall. They gave our possible whereabouts with a description of the boat and were emphasizing our ages. A search ensued. Coast Guard vessels and a helicopter engaged in the search.

Waves were coming over the boat and more water filled the cockpit. Barry kept working the sails, but the water was rising within the boat. There was only a hand-held bilge pump floating somewhere along with our now water-soaked lunch. I felt the boat becoming sluggish as we sat on the high side. "Get closer to the sandbar!" I heard from Barry. There was a scraping noise as we heeled and more water came in. We were actually sitting on the side of the boat at this point.

The Lightning sat up straight once again, not knowing this was to be the last time. The scraping commenced again, louder this time. Barry yelled, "That's the centerboard hitting bottom; it's shallow here!" The water in the cockpit was getting closer to my knees. A roar of the wind hit our sails, like a catcher's mitt getting hit by the pitcher's ball. The boat went way over on its side. I couldn't tell if the water was coming in or going out of the cockpit. Both Barry and I were launched skyward and then found ourselves falling into the mainsail. Our fall was cushioned by the mainsail and the water beneath. As I pushed down on the sail, I felt bottom. Barry and I doused the sails. The wind still held the boat over on its side. We walked around to the underside. How strange it looked, that thing sticking out of the bottom, the centerboard. Pushing her over, we pulled her into shallower waters by the sandbar. Rain was still heavy, but the water we stood in was

warm. We began to bail her out.

As quickly as the storm appeared, it was gone. It was like a locomotive out of control. The wind and waves had becalmed and the sun began to shine brightly, bringing welcomed warmth. A new howling noise surrounded us. We both looked up to see a helicopter descending right above us. I remember feeling uneasy as the rapid descent brought the copter quite close. The wind now whirled on top of us, making the water churn. I looked down and around, noticing two Coast Guard vessels approaching. The water we were standing in was really getting choppy now from the helicopter. Then a booming voice from above asked, "Are you two alright?" Barry and I looked up, stunned! Are you alright, the booming voice repeated. Yeah!..Yeah! We waved and jumped up and down! The copter veered away as the Coast Guard vessels neared. "Do you need assistance?" came over their speakers.

Barry yelled with a quick reply, "No!" They backed off slowly, then drifted before pulling away rapidly. We both looked at each other, thinking, "What was that?" Not known to us, this was a rescue mission for us!

We focused on the Lightning once again, bailing some more of the water before we pushed off the sandbar for home. With not a breath of wind, the sails hung limp. We took turns paddling for home, wondering how much trouble we'd be in. But an adventure it was!

In Memory of Barry: May his search for those moments continue!



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